

Bringing the Joy Back to Education: Microschooling and Distance Learning

By Matthew Ladner

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Key Points

- A set of promising new schooling techniques has gained traction during the pandemic, which could bring joy back to education.
- Hands-on distance learning offers the opportunity to employ creative new staffing models that make better use of teacher time and play to educators' individual strengths to yield better instruction.
- Microschooling that employs project-based learning could allow students to individually pursue their interests while maintaining the joy of community.
- If these two schooling techniques were combined, they could be a model for how to get the best of both worlds: better instruction and in-person community with reliable custodial care.

The American K–12 system had serious problems even before the pandemic. Teachers were frustrated, and students suffered growing levels of anxiety and depression, not to mention the downward academic achievement trends of the past decade. A 44-year veteran of classroom teaching, for instance, opined last year that it's not the financial side—which has always been tough—that's the problem with teaching these days. Rather, he said, it's that “the joy has been strangled out of the profession.”¹ It felt like we were spinning our wheels. COVID-19 greatly added to the misery, but some have used this adversity to pioneer novel schooling methods.

Thomas Edison said that genius is 99 percent perspiration and 1 percent inspiration. By necessity, a great deal of perspiration—and some inspiration—

went into adapting our education system during the outbreak.

A set of promising new schooling techniques has gained traction during the pandemic, which could bring joy back to education. Combined, they could create new opportunities for families and educators to make education more productive, more centered on family preferences, and even more fun for students and educators.

The first is hands-on distance learning to keep students engaged, such as the model created by New York City's Success Academy charter school network. In that model, the most effective teacher in the entire network of schools on any given subject delivered live instructional lectures, while other teachers broke students into smaller groups online to facilitate group discussion and projects.

This model enabled a system of schools to have 200 seventh graders learning from the most skilled math lecturer in the entire network. Then, with a touch of a digital button, the students could be divided into 20 groups of 10 students, led by teachers, for group work and discussions. Students could ask questions in both the larger and the small group settings. The digital platform that Success Academy used also allowed teachers to monitor ongoing assignments to identify students who were falling behind and proactively required students to attend online remedial tutoring sessions.

The Success Academy model resembles a digital version of a large college survey course. Some educators play the role of the professor, while others take on the role of small group facilitator. This high-engagement technique is nearly the opposite of the recorded lectures of the massive open online course craze. Constant engagement between teachers and students kept this version of digital learning from going off the rails.

Many people, however, view education as an inherently social endeavor. We want and need face-to-face contact with classmates and teachers. If this type of hands-on distance-learning model were combined with a microschooling program, it could be a model for how to get the best of both worlds: better instruction and in-person community with reliable custodial care.

A model of microschooling to emulate might be Arizona's Prenda, which has organized a growing number of small schools (8–10 students) paired with an adult “guide” rather than a teacher. Prenda runs microschools in partnership with districts and charters and as private schools. All Prenda students take Arizona's state academic exam.

Prenda is a bit like school meets scout troop. Students do distance learning with a one-to-one student to computer ratio—which, by the way, facilitated a relatively smooth transition during the spring shutdown. However, the real delight of the Prenda model lies in community and group projects. Students build robots, put on theatrical productions, and conduct and judge their own debates. They create videos, reports, computer programs, gardens, posters, dance routines, paintings, and more. Students can submit their own ideas

for creative projects to Prenda, and approved projects go into a project log that guides and students throughout the network can use.

In combination, hands-on virtual learning and microschooling employing project-based learning could combine the academic advantages of scale with the joy of community. An increase of schooling pluralism, significantly more parental options, and additional career opportunities for teachers can be achieved. Different flavors of microschools could be created through a combination of family demand and distance affiliation. Like-minded families could enroll and affiliate with an institution through distance learning and create the kind of education they envision for their kids. Whether families are interested in the arts, STEM, classics, or a long list of other possibilities, the sky is the limit.

Under a “mothership and pods” model, the distance-learning partner could provide live academic lectures, while in-person guides would facilitate related projects, group activities, and discussions. This technique could enable high-demand schools with waiting lists to offer students either the traditional in-person experience or a microschool alternative model. It would also increase the level of academic expertise available to a small school.

Currently, high-demand charter schools struggle to raise millions of dollars to build new facilities to create new opportunities for students. This model would use preexisting space and thus represent a different path to reducing the waiting lists. With the advent of “pandemic pods” during the summer of 2020, this could take the form of high-demand schools enrolling pod students into their distance-learning program. This would allow schools to address equity concerns such as the ability to pay pod leaders and device and internet access with public funds.

American education needed a reboot before the outbreak, and the outbreak only increased the strain. But in the long run, we may benefit from both the effort and brilliance of K–12 innovators whose methods were successful during the 2020 shutdown. Combining hands-on distance learning with in-person microschooling could expand opportunities for teachers and families while providing a new path forward for scaling the techniques used at high-demand schools.²

About the Author

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Notes

1. Matthew Ladner, “A New Hope on the Apache Reservation,” Chamber Business News, April 5, 2019, <https://chamberbusinessnews.com/2019/04/05/column-a-new-hope-on-the-apache-reservation/>.
2. A more detailed discussion of this concept can be found at Matthew Ladner, “The Next Big Thing Is Getting Smaller,” Arizona Charter Schools Association, August 6, 2020, <https://azcharters.org/2020/08/06/the-next-big-thing-is-getting-smaller/>.

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